



# 2018-2019

## School Food Environment Grades

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**Healthy School Food**  
M A R Y L A N D



# Executive Summary

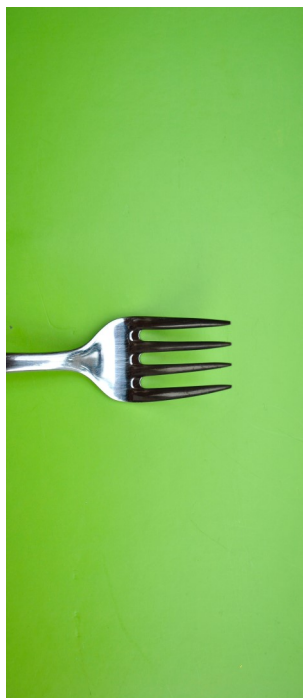


Healthy School Food Maryland conducted its review of the school food and wellness environment in all 24 public school districts in Maryland to produce the 2018 - 2019 School Food Environment Grades. We evaluated school nutrition policies and food offerings and were pleased to see, that for the second time, schools districts have responded to our prior feedback by making efforts to improve in every category area of our evaluation. We saw an **84-point overall increase in grades statewide**. This translates to an **8% overall improvement since 2016**. We are pleased to see that since we began issuing the grades, there has been consistent incremental progress.

We added a category on the availability of healthy vegetarian and plant-based options this year, because students and their families are increasingly asking for healthy, plant-rich options,

and found that school districts earned 45% on average of possible points for this category. We reevaluated every district's score in every category, rather than focusing solely on improvement over previous years, so that every district had an equal chance of scoring well. Further, other than refinement in the salad bar category, and the addition of the plant-based category, the criteria for grading did not change from last year, so that we could accurately gauge actual improvement over time.

**Howard County ranked highest overall** for the third year and maintained its curve-setting A+ grade. **Baltimore City rose in the rankings** and raised its grade from B to B+, due to overall improvement and because it was the only school district to score 4 out of 4 for plant-based options by serving entrées like falafel, black bean burgers, or Mediterranean flatbread every day. Consistent improvement in the top half of the rankings led to more grade differentiation and higher rankings for 5 additional districts, with **Montgomery County climbing 2 spots** in the rankings and improving its grade from a C+ to a B grade! **Calvert (+2)**, **Kent (+1)** and **Saint Mary's (+1)** also all improved their ranking and their grades. Even the bottom half of the rankings showed improvement, with Garrett County pulling its grade up to a passing grade, acknowledging that due to its own unique circumstances (size, location, resources), there were some areas where it couldn't compete with the bigger counties, but pledging to make improvements where it could, including rolling out an online system next year to make nutrition information available to families; it also consistently scores well for scratch-cooking and sourcing local produce from its many nearby farms.



The scoring rubric for the Grades covers areas of concern to parents and public health advocates, including consistent access to potable water; transparency about nutritional information available to families; amount of scratch cooking; prevalence of farm to school programs; policies prohibiting artificial colors and other chemicals in school food; access to healthier vending options; existence and influence of a district-level standing wellness committee; policies to reduce sugar in school food; variety and repetition of meals; availability of plant-based and vegetarian options; policies on the marketing of foods of minimal nutritional value in school; and practices around salad bars and cut up fruit.

Grading Scale	
A+	97%-100%
A	93%-96%
A-	90%-92%
B+	87%-89%
B	83%-86%
B-	80%-82%
C+	77%-79%
C	73%-76%
C-	70%-72%
D+	67%-69%
D	63%-66%
D-	60%-62%
F	0%-59%



# School Food Environment Grades Statewide Summary

District	2017	2018	Curved Percentage	Grade
Howard	36	40	100%	A+
Anne Arundel	32	37	94%	A
Baltimore City	28	32	87%	B+
Kent	28	32	87%	B+
Saint Mary's	28	32	87%	B+
Frederick	29	32	87%	B+
Calvert	27	31	85%	B
Montgomery	25	31	85%	B
Charles	27	30	81%	B-
Harford	23	29.5	80%	B-
Baltimore	28	29	80%	B-
Cecil	15	28	79%	C+
Carroll	23	27	75%	C
Talbot	21	27	75%	C
Dorchester	21	25	71%	C-
Washington	24	24	69%	D+
Queen Anne's	22	23	67%	D+
Caroline	20	23	67%	D+
Somerset	17	23	67%	D+
Wicomico	22	23	67%	D+
Prince George's	18	22	65%	D
Allegany	20	21	63%	D
Garrett	15	21	62%	D
Worcester	15	18	58%	F

# Detailed School Food Environment Scores

District	A la carte transparency	General transparency	Vending machines	Wellness Committee	Water and water bottles	Farm to school program	Scratch cooking	Menu variety and repetition	Added sugar	Salad bars	Chemicals	Marketing	Plant-based	Total 2018
Howard	4	2	4	3	2	4	3	3	3	4	1	4	3	40
Anne Arundel	4	4	4	4	2	4	3	3	3	3	1	1	1	37
Baltimore City	4	2	2	2	2	3	4	4	1	1	1	2	4	32
Kent	0	0	4	2	4	2	4	2	4	0	4	4	2	32
Saint Mary's	4	3	2	2	3	4	1	3	2	1	1	4	2	32
Frederick	4	2	4	2	4	3	1	3	2	3	1	1	2	32
Calvert	4	3	2	2	3	3	4	2	2	3	1	0	2	31
Montgomery	3	2	1	2	2	3	4	3	2	2	3	1	3	31
Charles	4	2	2	2	2	3	2	3	3	2	1	1	3	30
Harford	4	3	2	2	2	3	1	4	2	1.5	3	0	2	29.5
Baltimore	4	2	2	2	3	3	2	3	2	2	1	2	1	29
Cecil	0	2	4	4	2	2	3	3	3	1	0	3	1	28
Carroll	4	0	2	2	2	4	3	3	2	1	1	1	2	27
Talbot	4	0	2	2	2	4	3	3	3	2	1	0	1	27
Dorchester	4	2	1	1	3	2	3	2	3	1	1	0	2	25
Washington	0	2	4	2	1	1	4	1	2	3	1	2	1	24
Queen Anne's	0	0	4	2	2	2	4	3	2	2	1	0	1	23
Caroline	2	0	1	2	3	3	3	4	1	0	2	1	1	23
Somerset	4	0	1	2	2	2	4	3	3	0	1	0	1	23
Wicomico	4	0	4	1	1	0	2	4	4	0	1	1	1	23
Prince George's	0	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	2	2	1	1	2	22
Allegany	0	0	2	2	2	0	4	3	2	2	1	1	2	21
Garrett	0	0	2	2	2	3	3	2	2	0	1	2	2	21
Worcester	3	0	1	2	2	0	0	4	3	1	1	0	1	18

Rubric items grading scale: 0 low to 4 high



# Background

- Does your school system serve a variety of scratch-cooked, nutritious meals free of chemical additives?
- Does your school system encourage healthy selections through salad bars, farm to school programs, limiting sugar in school foods, limiting vending machines to healthier options and prohibiting marketing of unhealthy foods?
- Is your school system transparent on its menus and web site about the food it serves students?
- Does your school system allow meaningful parent and community input into wellness policies and procedures?



This image was originally posted to [Flickr](#) by USDAgov at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/41284017@N08/6238070477>

**The 2018-2019 School Food Environment Grades** can help answer these questions. Healthy School Food Maryland coordinates a coalition of 20 local, statewide and national organizations and businesses working for whole, real, local and safe food for children in Maryland public school cafeterias. The grades are based on a rubric of 13 items with grades ranging from 0-4 for each item.

In our third year of issuing grades, we are glad to see that many school districts have responded with efforts to improve their school food offerings, policies, and practices. The changes implemented will help students reach their highest potential for current and future health and academic achievement and will give parents the information they need to make informed decisions about their students' participation in the school meal program.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) of 2010 laid the foundation for significant improvements in the nutritional quality of school food throughout the country. By now, most districts have adjusted to the law's requirements by offering a greater variety and more servings of fruits and vegetables; no longer deep-frying foods or using trans-fats, serving grain-based foods that contain at least 50% whole grain; and serving only those a la carte foods that are in-line with nutritional standards for food served in meals. All of these requirements directly correlate to our rubric topics. However, in most cases, merely meeting USDA school

meal and a la carte regulations only earns a district a 1 or 2 out of 4 possible points in most rubric areas. Our aim is to acknowledge those districts that have set and met more ambitious goals, like providing a variety of wholesome, palatable scratch-cooked options, low in sugar and salt, prepared using local foods. We were especially concerned this year, that school districts may interpret the recent rule changes issued by the USDA (which roll back some of the nutrition standards established by earlier rules implementing the HHFKA), as free rein to halt or even reverse progress. We specifically asked school districts about their planned response to the changes, to help us tailor next year's evaluation to the changing landscape.

Grades on the rubric were determined based on communications with every Maryland school district between December 2018 and May 2019, analysis of web sites and wellness policies during that same period, analysis of elementary school lunch menus from October 2018 and April 2019, information from the 2015 USDA Farm to School Census, information provided by parents in some districts, and calls directly to individual schools when we received conflicting information or no response from food service personnel. After completing the rubrics, they were sent to the food service directors in each district for verification.

All documentation can be found at <https://tinyurl.com/y39exane>

# Rubric Detail

**À la Carte Transparency:** It is frustrating for parents to discover that their child is using their lunch money to buy chips, cookies and ice cream sold à la carte. These items rarely appear on printed menus. We were glad to see a 9-point increase in this category for the second year, with 14 districts attaining the highest grade of 4 for either not offering any a la carte foods (Baltimore City, Somerset) or for listing all à la carte foods by brand name and flavor on the school food services web site (Anne Arundel, Baltimore County, Calvert, Carroll, Charles, Dorchester, Frederick, Harford, Howard, Saint Mary's and Wicomico Counties).

**General Transparency:** Information about the ingredients (such as food dyes; added sugar; allergens or substances that trigger food sensitivities; or are otherwise avoided due to health, faith-based or ethical concerns) in foods served in schools should be easy to locate. Anne Arundel County reached the highest level of transparency by including full ingredient and nutrition facts labels for every component of prepared meals and for à la carte foods. There was a 4-point increase in this area overall, indicating a trend towards increasing transparency

**Vending Machines:** Federal Smart Snacks in Schools regulations require that foods and drinks available to students in vending machines during the school day meet nutritional standards, or that the vending machines are turned off, but some districts (Frederick, Howard, Kent, Queen Anne's, Talbot, Anne Arundel, Washington and Wicomico) require that **only** healthful options are ever available in vending machines. This category had a 3-point increase this year.

**Wellness Committees:** All counties had a School Health Council or a Wellness Committee (as required by federal law). Howard County earns top marks for a committee structure with full transparency about members (50% non-school system employees, 25% parents), and with the power to revise policy and procedures with board approval.

**Farm to School Programs:** Locally grown, healthy foods promote growth, nutrition and positive lifelong eating habits for children. Anne Arundel, Baltimore City, and Saint Mary's Counties procure at least 20% of school food (excluding milk) locally. Top-ranked Howard County, sources almost 50% of their food locally. Frederick County gets special mention this year for partnering with Community FARE to devise a long-term plan to integrate locally grown fruits and vegetables into all FCPS meals.

**Water and Water Bottles:** Some students cannot easily find an accessible and safe source of drinking water during the school day. Federal law requires access to potable water in all cafeterias, but Maryland law allows for a drinking fountain in the hallway outside of the cafeteria, which, may mean, in elementary schools, having to raise your hand and get permission before getting water or waiting until after lunch to get a drink. Some individual schools even prohibit students from carrying personal water bottles. Congratulations to Fredrick and Kent Counties on obtaining a score of 4 in this category, because they expressly allow personal water bottles and require water bottles on school supply lists.

**Scratch Cooking:** This category is one of the most important in determining student satisfaction with meals. Recent research suggests that the rise of highly processed foods to nearly 60% of the typical American diet may be the cause of the prevalence of obesity with its related health risks. Parents and students want food service to provide scratch-cooked rather than processed ready to heat menu items. Smaller counties tend to score higher in this category; they continue to nurture on-site cooking facilities. We applaud those counties that prepare at least 40% of their meals from scratch: Calvert, Montgomery, Queen Anne's, Somerset and Talbot with special recognition to Baltimore City and Allegany, Washington and Kent Counties for cooking at least 60% of their meals from scratch. See scratch cooking meal examples for standards.

**Menu Variety and Repetition:** Highest scores of 4 went to districts that limit typical "kid food": pizza to twice a week in secondary schools and once a week in elementary schools, or hot dogs, burgers and fries to once a week at all levels. Congratulations to Allegany, Anne Arundel, Carroll and Harford Counties who offered more than 30 different entrée choices on their elementary lunch menus and limited repetition of "kid foods," proving that children will eat foods other than pizza, burgers, hot dogs and fries, if offered.

**Harmful Chemicals and Food Dyes:** Chemical additives commonly found in highly processed school foods, such as synthetic food dyes and preservatives like BHA, BHT and TBHQ have questionable safety profiles. Kent and Montgomery Counties prohibit all synthetic food dyes and some additives in their procurement practices, and Kent County earns 4 out of 4 for including this prohibition in their "Wellness Through Healthy School Environments" policy. There was a modest 3-point increase in this category this year.





**Added Sugar:** Public health advocates urge limiting children's consumption of added sugar to 25g per day, and the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) recommends added sugars be limited to 10% of total calories, but the USDA requirement for school food is a less restrictive 35% by weight. This year, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Heart Association jointly called for policy-level change to address the level of added sugars in children's diets. Of concern are added sugars in school breakfasts: a school food service whole-grain cinnamon roll (14g) and a chocolate milk (22g of sugar incl. 10g added sugar) provide 24g of added sugar in one sitting. This category has experienced modest gains (5%) since 2016, though it critically requires improvement. Howard, Cecil, Charles and Talbot Counties have the strongest policies limiting sugar, but only Kent County, explicitly limits added sugar by meal to 10% of total calories and Wicomico County requires its nutrition standards be based on DGAs, rather than less stringent USDA standards.

**Food and Beverage Marketing:** There was an overall point increase of 7 in this category; several districts updated their policies. Saint Mary's and Kent Counties' policies stand out for protecting children from the marketing of corporate brands unless every food or beverage product manufactured, sold or distributed under the corporate brand name is Smart Snacks compliant. Food companies deceptively co-market their compliant copycat version within schools (with packaging, posters and labels) while selling similarly branded unhealthy versions of the products outside school settings. Policies that limit the ability of big food companies to direct their advertising at schoolchildren in schools, to create brand trust and familiarity, acknowledge that schools play a role in protecting children from misleading messaging.

**Salad Bars:** School food leaders around the country have begun using salad bars as a means of offering a fresh, healthy option to children while increasing their intake of fresh fruits and vegetables (FFV). Growth in this category was slow this year, because installing equipment and prepping fresh produce requires infrastructure investment and institutional buy-in. We were pleased to see that school districts are exploring innovative ways to get more FFV to students, using entrée salads, salad bowls and grab and go kiosks, but we'd like to see more consistent progress. Accolades to Howard County, which offers salad bars at all schools.

**Vegetarian and Plant-based Options:** We added this rubric category in partnership with Friends of the Earth. Demand for healthy vegetarian and plant-based options has been rising, both from families who follow these diets for religious, ethical or health reasons, but also from parents and kids who are omnivores but want more meatless options. According to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, on average, kids are eating far fewer vegetables, fruits, legumes and other plant-based foods than is recommended. Offering more healthy plant-focused meals can improve the well-being of students and is also better for the environment. Congratulations to Baltimore City and Howard County for achieving top scores by offering plant-based options like falafel on flatbread, veggie burgers, hummus plates, and salad bars every day. To learn more about strategies for scaling up plant-based school food offerings, visit <https://foe.org/projects/school-food-purchasing/>

## Acknowledgments

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